

Empowering **MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN INDIA**

The Impact of Higher Education

**EDITED BY
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 **SAGE**

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State of Higher Education in India

Prakash Desai

Higher education is an important means of bringing about comprehensive development in any society. Any country which has a strong foundation of higher education can realize progress in different spheres of life. A strong foundation and growth of higher education have been the main factors which identify many Western countries as developed countries. This is not the story in the case of developing countries like India. Though higher education received some attention in the early decades after Independence, it has not yet received genuine attention on the part of both the Central government and the state governments. Consequently, it has not reached every section of the society, especially the marginalized. Moreover, whatever little bit progress was made has been eroded due to several factors such as corruption, nepotism in recruitment, political interference and many others. The quality of teaching and research has come down,¹ and there is no botheration about these developments on the part of respective governments and larger society.

From 1948 to 1990, a number of higher education learning centres such as Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, central universities and regional universities were established. However, they did not become educational agencies

to accommodate and include students from every section of the society. The strategy of state-centric development was not able to make education as a public good in genuine sense. It did not realize the connection between primary and higher education. The people and areas which did not have access to primary education were deprived of access to higher education. The vast mass of children belonging to the deprived communities need to go to good schools and only then they can enter universities and institutes of higher education (Borooah, 2010).

The New Economic Policy (NEP) that was introduced in 1991 has its implications for higher education also (Kesar et al., 2019). The introduction of new economic reform policies that included stabilization and structural adjustment had tremendous impact on higher education (Jandhyala, 2004). Educational marginality of socially marginalized people, a kind of alliance between crony capitalism and communal forces,² and communalization of education are some of the developments that have been taking place for even longer than the two and a half decades. The capitalist forces and communal forces have been emerging as dominant forces in India. The capitalists are expanding their scope of capital investment and receiving direct and indirect support from the communal forces. Their activities are in tandem destroying the very idea of higher education. In this paper, an effort has been made to understand the process of commercialization and communalization of higher education in India. In this direction, the sub-themes covered in this paper are as follows: (a) market and higher education, (b) private universities and freedom of social research, (c) higher education and communal agenda and (d) the political consensus on commercialization of higher education.

Market and Higher Education

For longer than the two decades, higher education in India has been following the path of commercialization and trying its best to cater to the market needs. Both private and public institutions of higher education are trying hard to attract students for their

market-oriented programmes like management, technical and medical education. These programmes are very expensive and students from socially and economically marginalized sections are not in a position to opt for such programmes. This leads one to believe that the higher education system is not a space that stands for equality, social justice, social inclusiveness and, above all, social democracy. There may be some positive developments, for instance, in the case of increased presence in higher education institutions of students from backward classes, but there are still many problems as far as the presence of students from Muslim minority is concerned (Apoorvanand, 2018). Muslims still do not have much presence in higher education (Apoorvanand, 2018).

There are certain observations to be made about public and private universities in the context of certain developments that are taking place in the country. The experiences of the last 20 odd years show that there have been few vice chancellors who have not spoken much on interconnectedness between market and universities. Many of them have reflected a lot on this and tried to make the university educational system facilitative towards the market and its needs. With this in mind, many new programmes are being offered at the university level. Most of these programmes do not have the philosophical foundations of core disciplines. The example of programmes related to governance and development can be given in this regard. If there are no philosophical basics of economics and political science in the above-mentioned programme, the pertinent questions that arise are: (a) how is development defined? (b) whether the idea of development is to be understood as an idea which facilitates social and economic inclusiveness or whether development is to be treated as a mainstream economic concept which favours only the elite sections of the society. These are difficult questions which need to be answered by the concerned people who have been in the forefront of the attempts to make educational programmes of universities pro market. These questions need to be answered because there is a need for democratizing the teaching in higher education learning centres. Our higher-educational institutions and the people who are heading them have to be

socially accountable to the society. It is not just the question of creation of interconnectedness between higher education and industry that has to become the concern; the utmost concern should be creation of interconnectedness between society and higher-educational institutions. Higher-educational institutions should be made socially accountable to the marginalized in the society. There should be interconnectedness between marginalized class, marginalized gender, marginalized caste, marginalized religious groups and higher-educational institutions.³

Credit goes to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that was in power from 2004 to 2014 for establishing new central universities for many states of the Union. This could be considered a great development for the country. Most of these universities are established in backward regions of the respective states for the benefit of the people. However, if recent developments are taken into consideration, they cannot be considered as agencies of educational development. One can see a number of problems in the functioning of these universities. These universities have given major support to only some programmes such as management and natural sciences. Social science disciplines are getting step-motherly treatment. Thus, the plurality⁴ in education in these universities was continuously being neglected during the UPA regime at the Centre. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which formed the government at Centre in 2014 has also followed the same approach as far as central universities are concerned. It tried to control and destroy the foundation of social sciences in all old central universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University.⁵ Progressive teachers and student organizations of these universities faced trouble from their administrations,⁶ which are guided by the indirect intervention of the government. Where there is a demand for making education inclusive and affordable, the efforts are being made to dismantle the eminent institutions of higher learning (Chirmuley, 2017).

Universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University became targets of the NDA government because of the ideological plurality of their students and teachers.⁷ These are public educational institutes

where there is no scope for any brand of communalism and sectarianism. The reason for parties like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to target such public educational institutes is explained well by Romila Thapar (Thapar, 2016). The BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh had to face a number of prestigious learning centres where there has been a demand for the right to debate ideas and issues that may be understood to be very critical. When they failed in curbing the demand for debate, the alternative left with them was to dismantle such learning centres by creating disturbances.

There are other worrying developments taking place in higher-educational institutions under the spell of market forces and neoliberal philosophy. Public universities are administered by people who give importance to surveillance, efficiency and techno-managerial solutions (Pathak, 2018). Avijit Pathak has analysed these developments well. He observes that as these 'academic bureaucrats become overwhelmingly powerful, critical pedagogues become marginalised. Idealism dies as fear or forced labour is normalised' (Pathak, 2018). Recognizing the importance of critical pedagogy, he writes, the

University recovers its soul only through the spirited work of critical pedagogues; and the therapeutic function of critical pedagogy is to learn to redefine the meaning of work and freedom—work as creative play, freedom as engaged responsibility and concern for others and time as enabling, not constraining. (Pathak, 2018)

With regards to such an understanding of research and teaching, it is a general tendency on the part of academic administrators to come up with an argument that universities cannot run with the presence of only some disciplines, however important they may be, and there cannot be proper order in the universities without control, standardization and monitoring (Pathak, 2018). Thus, academic bureaucrats would not like to give importance to critical pedagogy. The effect of such tendency can be seen in the way certain disciplines are treated. The disciplines like philosophy, anthropology, political science, sociology and history

are not given much importance because they are the sources of critical thinking and they pave the way for logic, reason, debate and discussion.

Private Universities and Freedom of Social Research

There has been discussion that higher education should be further privatized. One of the observations that is given for privatization of higher education is that publicly provided professional education has not expanded and it has not met the growth in demand (Balakrishnan, 2015). This observation of proponents of private education has its own validity, but there are many problems in privatizing higher education. Higher education is not just about technical education. It comprises natural sciences and social sciences. Our policymakers and political class, those who are involved in educational policy formulation, should understand the nature, scope and importance of higher education. In the private universities which have already come into existence, research related to social sciences is not receiving required encouragement. Though these private universities may claim that they too have social sciences divisions, fundamental and dynamic research related to social sciences is not being undertaken.

There are many private universities in developed Western countries. Though these universities are managed by the private sector, they have retained educational autonomy and freedom. The management is always a great supporter of their autonomy. Many scholars from reputed universities work as faculty members in Indian private universities. These scholars cannot undertake research on the basis of progressive philosophy or approaches. Their research is not supposed to go against the philosophy of the management. Since these universities are managed or owned by industrialists or business firms, any research which questions the philosophy of neoliberalism cannot be conducted without unnecessary interference. For these reasons, it is suggested that the state take the responsibility of the management of institutes of higher education.

The very idea of autonomy being demanded and offered has different objectives in the case of India. The issue of autonomy raised has intention of commercializing education and pushing away disciplines of social sciences from the institutions of higher education. Education loses its purpose if it does not prepare youth for leading a meaningful life. Society not only educates its youth to acquire skills but also to allow the fullest development of the personality in them (Prasad, 2005). Autonomy is actually required for higher-educational institutions in this regard. Autonomy is required for the social sciences to teach and encourage free thinking. 'Education must encourage both competence and critical thinking' (Prasad, 2005). Unfortunately, this is not generally made as a reason for demanding autonomy. It is pertinent to keep in mind here

That the best institutions of higher education in the world in terms of quality and standards are public institutions or private institutions that are guided by the principles of philanthropy. They are certainly not for-profit institutions. Besides, for-profit institutions are hardly inclusive in providing access to higher education. As a matter of fact, they are clearly exclusionary in nature. (Jandhyala, 2012)

In the name of autonomy, crucial role of higher education is getting forgotten. The role that higher-educational institutions are there for teaching and following the idea of inclusive societal development that results in inclusive society and inclusive democracy is not being given much importance.

Constructing the notion of what should constitute higher education is working in tandem with institutional agendas and societal aspirations. Educational institutions are setting and following the agendas of what is considered important education for human life, and, at the individual level, parents are responding to such notions by imposing these agendas by forcing their children to be the experiments. Regarding the nature of success associated with education, it is observed that in the age of trade and economic utility the success is based on the hierarchy of disciplines (Pathak, 2018). Disciplines like science and commerce are considered as

superior and moneymaking whereas a negative orientation is attached to arts and humanities (Pathak, 2018). The thinking is such that arts and humanities have no future; so bright students are not supposed to study and opt for such branches of knowledge (Pathak, 2018). This is a very regressive and totalizing thinking in the sense that it would not allow aspirants of knowledge to get exposed to the branches of knowledge which plays an important role in building a humane and democratic society that further makes the world cosmopolitan and harmonious without facilitating any scope for ethnocentric tendencies and regressive thinking.

It is common knowledge that many of teachers and parents pressurize children to opt for disciplines which they think would help children's lives. Children are not given the chance to think about their choice of education and career. This could be considered as the beginning of some kind of isolation or detachment in the life of children (Pathak, 2018). When friends, neighbours and relatives, as a part of society, put restrictions on children's imagination, children's anxiety and fear are further intensified, and this condition makes them to believe that life is necessarily dark and bleak without medical, technological and management studies (Pathak, 2018). As a solution to this problem, Avijit Pathak suggests that teachers, educationists and adults in general need to tell children the importance of inner fulfilment (Pathak, 2018). To become successful, one needs to find happiness and meaning in any profession that is voluntarily opted. The profession may be farming, nursing or teaching. Second, he suggests that for a mature society all kinds of professions are required. It is the task of teachers to make child understand his or her potential (Pathak, 2018). Society cannot run merely relying on one particular profession. For its vibrancy, it needs the presence of many professions. As engineers and doctors are required for society, in the same way, historians, filmmakers, economists and many more are required. Pathak's third prescription is very meaningful and philosophical. There should be encouragement for youngsters to think differently, to take a risky path and experiment with life. Continuous pressure to remain normal and opt safe path does not empower youngsters to make life meaningful (Pathak, 2018).

Higher Education and Communal Agenda

Direct and indirect interference of communal forces in policy formulation and implementation with respect to higher education is another problem to be concerned about. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is one of the major sources of finance for universities. Apart from the UGC, universities apply for financial support from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and other institutions associated with the Central government, in order to undertake research activities. If these institutions are headed by people who come from the background of communal philosophy and organizations, one cannot expect liberal and autonomous decisions from them with respect to any academic activity. Academic activities like seminars and projects which explore liberal and progressive ideas may not get support from funding councils if they are under the control of people with certain ideological or communal approach. The issue of concern in universities is with respect to faculty recruitment.⁸ If universities are headed by people with an ideological bias, faculty recruitment for universities may not be purely on the basis of merit. Rather, it can happen on the basis of communal considerations.

Introducing Indian philosophy, culture, civilization, religions and history to the world and Indian students has always been one of the objectives of higher education in India. In this direction, several disciplines and subjects were introduced in the country's various universities and research centres. The general idea which guided these disciplines and subjects did not have any hidden agenda to fulfil. Overall, these disciplines and subjects were studied and researched with the support of all philosophical approaches without any bias. This has not been the case when the BJP came to the power. It tried to bring in its own ideological biases in the process of understanding the areas of Indic studies mentioned above. It made an effort to distort the facts and tried to give a distorted understanding of Indic thought and life. BJP, which came to power at the Centre in 2014, gave enough scope to such activities of distorted understanding of Indic thought. The process of

popularizing the Indic thought by the scholars who are influenced by the rightist ideology received enough support in the period of the BJP's government at the Centre from 2014 to 2019.

There is nothing wrong in giving importance to Indic thought in higher-educational institutions, but the problem lies in the way these ideas are understood and researched. The trend in Indic ideas in recent times is that they are studied, researched and debated with two main philosophical bases, either Vedic or Shramanic. There are ideas and existence beyond Vedic and Shramanic bases. Our Adivasi life and philosophy, our non-Vedic life and philosophy have their own significance and relevance. Ideas beyond Vedic and Shramanic are very much Indian and need to be discussed and researched. Unfortunately, even progressive scholars are not giving the required attention to this lacuna. Our higher-educational institutions are supposed to give importance to research on such life and philosophy so that they become known at national and international level. Many among us do not know the life and philosophy of the people living in different regions of the country. Cultures, religions, social visions of our own several communities are missing in the knowledge and awareness of our many people including educated and highly educated. There is total ignorance and illiteracy about our own regions in the country. This ignorance is causing the prejudices and divisions in the country. The process of constructing other within our own is mainly due to our ignorance and illiteracy about our own people, their culture, language and their philosophy of life.

It needs to be emphasized that the idea of India is not sectarian and exclusive. The idea of India is open and gives space for several voices (Ganeri, 2009). These voices might be orthodox and dissenting of different regions, ages and affiliations (Ganeri, 2009). Any direct or indirect threat to this civilizational foundation cannot be sustained but remains as an unwarranted phase in our history for the future. India as a civilization has received many ideas from the world and has contributed many ideas to the world. This is the reason that India is not just known as Bharat,

it is Vishwabharati—Vishwabharati of Rabindranath, Discovered Bharat of Nehru and Prabuddha Bharat of Ambedkar. Bharat of Rabindranath, Nehru and Ambedkar is a confluence of several streams of ideas.

The Political Consensus on Commercialization of Higher Education

The discussion on privatizing higher education began during the period of the NDA government (1999–2004). The special subject group established under the leadership of Mukesh Ambani by this government had advised private finance in higher education (Sharma, 2001). In actuality, in the name of the knowledge economy, this special group was hinting at commercialization of higher education (Sharma, 2001). The report submitted to the Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry by Mukesh Ambani and Kumar Mangalam Birla in April 2000 'sought to convert the entire system of higher education in the country into a market where profit making would be the only consideration' (Sharma, 2010).

After the NDA experiment, the UPA, which came to power at the Centre in 2004, set up the National Knowledge Commission. This commission came up with a number of good suggestions, but it did not remain free from the idea of private finance in education. The commission recommended 'the expansion of the number of universities to 1,500 in the country' (Jandhyala, 2007). There was a belief that it 'would enable India to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 percent by 2015' (Jandhyala, 2007). Consequently, both the Central government and many state governments have established universities. However, if one looks at the state of these newly established universities, there are many problems to be tackled. Universities are facing the problem of basic infrastructure facilities. It is a widely known fact that many teaching and non-teaching positions are vacant. Whatever recruitment has taken place has also been widely criticized because of certain unfair practices. The other recommendation of the commission was 'autonomy for the universities to set student

fee levels, tap other sources, and also for the commercial use of university facilities' (Jandhyala, 2007, p. 632). Thus, the overall approach adopted by the commission was 'largely pro-private, and even anti-public' (Jandhyala, 2007).

The NDA that came to power in 2014 was in the news for its many controversial policy formulations and implementations regarding higher education.

The most controversial decision in the realm of higher education was the selection of 'Institutions of Eminence'. In the 2016 budget, the government announced it would select 20 institutions, 10 each in the public and private sector, which would get funds and greater administrative autonomy to achieve top-500 positions in international university rankings. (Chowdhury, 2019)

In the direction of this decision, the government 'announced the names of six institutions of higher education—three each in public and private sectors—that have been granted the status' (Choudhury, 2018), the status of Institutions of Eminence. Interestingly, one of them was 'Jio Institute, an institution proposed to be set up by Reliance Foundation, led by Nita Ambani' (Choudhury, 2018). The selection of this non-existent institute sparked controversy (*Indian Express*, 2018). Discussions and criticisms were raised regarding the rationale behind the selection of this institute.

The other issue that received attention was the government's effort to withdraw finance to higher education.

The withdrawal of university grants came with the idea of pushing institutions to raise funds from the market. For this, the Higher Education Finance Agency was created in November 2017. It is a non-banking finance corporation that gives infrastructure loans to universities and colleges. The institutions are expected to repay the principal amount within 10 years, while the government pays the interest. (Chowdhury, 2019)

The universities which opt for such loans 'will have to raise their own funds through fees and research earnings to pay the

loans back' (Jha & Jamil, 2018). In this way, universities would become 'corporate entities, entangled in a web of real-estate and finance dealings' (Jha & Jamil, 2018). It would adversely affect students and parents who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

These developments show a clear political consensus on the part of political parties towards commercializing and privatizing the higher education. When a political establishment plays with the issues of the common people, the public has to play a greater role. Every citizen has to engage with the establishment to teach it the grammar of democracy. Every Indian citizen has to ensure that the government gives priority to public interests and protects public services like health and education. There has been a problem with the funding of education and health. They have continued to remain not properly supported (Chattopadhyay, 2020). Citizens should make the government to protect services like these from onslaught by the forces which propagate 'the ideology of the marketplace as the solution to every issue' (Sharma, 2005).

The BJP, which again came to power in 2019, is emphasizing on reforms in higher education. The new National Education Policy is being discussed and reviewed by the government (*Indian Express*, 2020). Some of the stated objectives of this new process are to bring higher education at par with the highest global standards, providing education, which is effective, inclusive and contemporary, rooted in the Indian culture and ethos (*Indian Express*, 2020). These objectives can be appreciated but the problem is with respect to bringing them into practice. India's record of implementing the principle of good-quality education is not satisfactory (Jha & Parvati, 2019). It needs to be seen how the government and future governments are going to implement the stated principles of the process. They should not become like pre-election manifesto promises which can be brushed aside (Deshpande, 2019).

Certain concerns have already been expressed regarding the draft National Education Policy 2019, which is being discussed by the government and all the concerned (Roy, 2019). It was observed that 'the policy envisages a centralised and tightly

structured system that will be under the direct control of political leaders of the government of the day' (Robinson, 2019). The other observation regarding the policy is 'autonomy and academic freedom popularly understood would become casualties to the changes in the regulatory regime and governance structure it lays down' (Bohidar, 2019). It is to be noted that the report of India's first Education Commission emphasized teachers and students as a learning society to retain 'their independence from interference by political and market forces, from pressures of governmental, administrative and financial intervention, and the prejudices of socio-religious ideologies' (Prasad, 2019).

Whether the government at the centre is the UPA or the NDA, their educational approach to a large extent has remained the same and is causing great destruction of higher education. It has become difficult to identify the political forces which stand for inclusive and democratic higher education. If market principles are applied to education, the very objective of education is lost (Chattopadhyay, 2009). There is danger in treating education as any other consumption good (Chattopadhyay, 2009). The process of making education as any other good causes education to lose its vital role—its role 'in building up of a democratic, humane, and inclusive society' (Chattopadhyay, 2009). The narratives on the part of political forces in India clearly convey that they are not serious about the future course of action on higher education. Some might be in favour of mere privatization of higher education, but some are very clear about their agenda of privatizing and communalizing higher education.

Notes

1. See Bhoite (2009).
2. To know how political elites, including in the Bharatiya Janata Party, have given importance to market and globalization, read Priya Chacko (2019). Also read Hansen (1996, 2015).
3. Read the project discussed in the article by Divya Trivedi (2018).
4. To know more about the importance of pluralism in universities, read Ramchandra Guha (2007).

5. To know how some universities faced certain problems in last few years, read Arunima (2017).
6. See Sanjaya Baru (2018).
7. To know more about diversity, democracy and dissent in JNU, read Jean-Thomas Martelli and Khaliq Parkar (2018).
8. See, Kumar Buradikatti (2020). One such example of the violation of norms and procedures is given here. There are many more such developments that happened in last many years.

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